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ABSTRACT

There are Hispanics who reject their ethnicity. This process may be obvious or it may be subtle. The rationale for this behavior is that by rejecting "Hispanidad" and adapting linguistic styles, dressing habits, and other behavior patterns they become Americans, the more acceptable mainstream group. An Hispanic person does not need to stop being Hispanic in order to be an acceptable American. In fact, a well informed Hispanic who is well adapted and articulate is an acceptable person in his own right. Hispanics who are not able to deal with the clash between their ethnic endowment and their social survival in the mainstream culture live a split and uncertain existence. The tragic situation about ethnic uncertainity is that at times Hispanics who are in a position of power and authority fail to help those who have helped them achieve this status. Ethnic uncertainty is, in its constructive form, a call for all Hispanics to unearth and rediscover their forgotten knowledge, the cultural link, the language which unites the psyche of all Latins who are physically, educationally, sociceconomically and spiritually struggling to earn and achieve a respectable place in American society. (Author/AM)

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INCERTIDUMBRE ETNICA: a psychological analysis of dormant Hispanidad

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I. SYMBOLIC SELF-REJECTION

There are Hispanos who reject their Hispanidad. This phenomenon may be quite obvious, or it may be subtle, conscious and unconscious. But, in certain ways, the person undermines and attacks other Hispanos whom he/she readily declares inferior to him/her. He/she rejects them as he/she symbolically rejects his/her own Hispanidad. The person may not realize it but upon attacking other Hispanos, he/she is tearing down his/her own Hispanidad.

Every human being has the need to be accepted in the eyes of others, especially those who are important in his/her individual and public life, where power, class and prestige are relevant parameters. Acceptance by others becomes a yardstick of selfworth. When one is rejected one knows that he/she is dissonant to the rejecting group, large or small. But the rejected person must face the rejection and develop strategies to deal with it. Each person varies in his/her strategies to deal with rejection, because every person needs some measure of acceptance; continuous rejection is bound to have a deep impact on the individual. For this reason, some individuals wind up trying to behave as if they were more acceptable to "others" by being less Hispanos. They quickly and artificially adopt linguistic styles, dressing patterns, shopping habits and other behaviors which are perhaps overdone; they become "other", more "American" than "the Americans."* At that point these Hispanos behave as if they were non-Hispanos and they reaffirm such behavior by putting down their ethnic brethren. It is as if they needed to keep convincing themselves that they are not like "them."

(*) In New York ethnic groups are named, e.g., Black, Puerto Rican, Orientals.... but whites are referred to as "other."

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There are certain qualities which are desirable of any mature human being. For instance, every person should aspire to be well informed, for we live in times when minutes, seconds, numbers and projections are essential in our daily decisions; those who know how to find the available resources do better than those who are ignorant of said opportunities. Similarly, we live in a rapidly changing laboratory of people in which communication skills play a crucial role in toning down revolts, wars, misunderstandings as well as in fostering a more livable world. But at the core of all desirable human qualities and abilities each person has, first of all, him/nerself to deal with: his experiences, weaknesses, strengths and resources. Therefore, a person who finds him/herself continuously dissonant with those who surround him/her may end up rejecting his her way of being. Not being acceptable in one's own mirror and the social context the person is at a loss. The person may try to become someone else, if unable to develop desirable qualities which would maintain his/her selfhood.

In reality, an Hispano person <u>does not need</u> to ever stop being Hispano in order to be an acceptable American. Far from it, a self-acceptant, well informed Hispano who lives and moves along with the times, who is open to communicate, to give and take, to articulate and exchange with others is an acceptable person in his/her own right; he/she is a desirable, productive human being in this nation and elsewhere. This is why an Hispano person does not need to strip him/herself of what he/she is but to maintain, develop and strengthen his/her Hispanidad. After all trails have been tried and/or improvised the person has only him/herself to return to and start from....

The need for acceptance when crushed brings back to the core of the individual a streak of doubt: "maybe I am not good enough". This realization, right or wrong, is fed with new unpleasant experiences and the individual ends up not only believing that he/she is not good enough but acting out the part by desperately trying to assimilate, to fill the vacuum, to act "American" in order to be consonant with the dominant group or class in power and authority. He/she sees his/her Hispanidad as a burden. This Hispanidad is reflected in the heavy Spanish-accented pronunciation he/she hears in his/her parents, siblings, other relatives and the area at large. It may be that a person who has been shaken by dissonant experiences which he/she has interpreted as rejection "because he/she is an Hispano" becomes unduly sensitive to ethnicity. The person assumes rejection; he/she anticipates rejection and becomes "touchy" about being an Hispano even when other variables should be considered instead. Thus, the person may generalize all types of bad experiences with other people and attribute them to rejection because of ethnicity alone. Assuming and anticipating troubles if not failure this type of Hispano may take unjustified refuge in his/her Hispanidad. He/she blames Hispanidad, which becomes all those negative attributes that he/she ascribes to the Hispanos. He/she now uses the group instead of examining his/her own behavior in the social context which is important to him/her. In other words, it is he/she who rejects the Hispanos, but he/she behaves as if "others" reject him/her for his/her Hispanidad.

Children are less inhibited, more daring than adults and far more flexible to acquire language. Thus, many children e.g. younger than nine, learn to speak as native Americans; but they also introject a measure of self-rejection if confronted

with sustained rejection by important figures who insist on speaking English but who say little about Spanish. This rejection of self is expressed unconsciously perhaps in their rejection of the prime symbol of their own Hispanidad, namely, their own ethnic group and its vehicle of cultural continuity, Spanish. But ethnic uncertainty is far more than a linguistic phenomenon; it has little to do with how much or how little English the person commands it is a cultural rip in which the person alters his/her personality in the same way he/she eliminates the accents in his/her own name and takes up an "American" name, supposedly a translation and/or an Americanized pronunciation as a replacement of his Hispano name. He/she alters his/her personality as if he/she altered his/her image in the mirror of existence.

There are Hispano children who are born in English-speaking homes and Americanized (assimilated) ways. So, their mother tongue is English and it should be so. Other children are born in different situations and that should be fine also. But the problem stems from the undue pressures placed by a dominant culture which is sadly unaware of multi-ethnic worth. Children areexposed to this as well as adults and both pay the price to the extreme that some end up rejecting themselves totally. They are not Latins and they do not feel "American" either. Others assume an almost messianic endeavor to work themselves up to measure to produce more than others so as to be considered "equal" a myth which is far from realization while they remain ethnically uncertain.

There are Hispanos who are healthy, who are not hung up on whether or not they must measure their worth against a larger, dominant culture and put down that which should be their own. These human beings are spread throughout different paths of life and occupations. Among them one finds unsung heroes, unrecognized

warriors in the struggle for survival in the highly competitive American Society. Language and Hispanidad are only two dimensions in the realm of resources.

2. STRUGGLE FOR POWER, AUTHORITY AND CLASS

There is a reality which must be understood: Hispanos have a style of learning, a style of behaving which is unique. For instance, Hispanos honor an unwritten contract; in fact written contracts do not exist among friends and relatives and they have a built-in faith in human goodness. Hispanos are taught as children to be well-mannered socially, to defer the spotlight to others because humility and honesty are cultural values inbedded in the Hispano psyche. But we live in a culture where social courtesies, humility and honesty are easily abused by the aggressive mainstream American attitude in which the "good" Hispanos are taken for naive and ignorant. This has happened to trusting newlyarrived Hispano mothers who have taken their children to school, to those classroom teachers who have worked beyond the call of duty, to bilingual supervisors who have given their sleepless existence working in a thankless system, to college instructors who have been the first ones booted out with the convenient excuses of "financial crisis", "seniority", "meritocracy". They have been taken for naive and ignorant. All these people have been used and abused by a society which crushes values and virtues different from mainstream America. However, Hispanos cannot destroy in themselves those cultural values and virtues without undergoing a cultural metamorphosis. Psyche is the root of our thoughts; it is the store of past experiences, especially those which have had a deep impact in our lives as infants, children, adolescents, adults and it is also the projection towards the future, the dream that every person has to fulfill,his/her goals and aspirations. When the reality of which the person is aware is sour, cruel

and/or obnoxious, the individual resorts to creating substitutes, that is to say, more palatable realities. The person begins to distort the present by changing his/her past ("mis abuelos eran europeos nobles, tenían fortuna, eran educados.....") and trying to aim at a different future.

Change is not necessarily bad; in fact most people do not trouble themselves to take note of who and what they really are, who and what they have been. When they start this process of self-examination- they grow, they become more self-assured, stronger, and more helpful to self and others. It is as if in one's every day life he/she may get so boggled that he/she turns away from him/herself thus becoming alienated and disjointed. When one finally ensues a search within, he/she not only finds answers but also discovers talents, resources which have laid doormant, untapped while the person has been failing unnecessarily. He/she has been looking for answers and half-solutions from others, from impersonal circles which obscure and deny his/her hispanidad. A person does not rid him/herself of his/her formative, cultural roots easily and perhaps never completely. For this reason many Hispanos learn to trade, to deal with two cultural worlds. They learn to utilize a bicultural endowment. One endowment is what his/her ethnic group has and in which he/she is born: language, beliefs, fears, attitudes towards self, others, religion, traditions, negative and positive values. The successful Hispanos can deal with their own bethren without cultural dissonance, without cultural distance. The other cultural endowment develops when they acquire social knowledges and skills which are effective when communicating, exchanging, dealing with the dominant, superimposed American culture.

They do not have to stop being Hispano in order to function effectively in the mainstream American Society. They too learn to survive by becoming socially aggressive and competitive, putting their intelligence to work in a new social context.

Unfortunately, there are Hispanos who are unable to deal with the clash between their ethnic endowment and their social survival in the mainstream culture. They either intentionally and/or unconsciously begin to drop their Hispanidad and as they assume a more socially acceptable style of behavior they become assimilated, whether they know it or not. The culmination of this process of internal self-negation is that these Hispanos hurt themselves by assuming one half of a split world, the American side; the Hispano side becomes dormant, practically void. These people at times find good opportunities to move along in the mainstream culture. But, in their split existence, these individuals fluctuate, for in some ways, they realize internally that they are considered, classified, as Latins whether they like it or not. So, there are middle class, suburban Hispanos who wonder why don't "they accept us, we are as good as our neighbors?" These Hispanos feel and act the "same" as "others" until the day jobs and dollars must determine who runs out of luck. Then those Hispanos suffer trying to prove that they are not "like the rest of the Hispanos", those they themselves have put down.

The tragic situation about ethnic uncertainty is that at times Hispanos who are bad news for other Hispanos get to positions of power and authority and fail to help those who have helped them achieved such status. Sadly, they portray themselves as the most deserving of those positions and many a times these individuals become the speakers for Hispanos, opportunistic persons who are tigers and lions when dealing with Hispanos but who are lame ducks and subservients when dealing

with those in power in the mainstream culture. These Hispanos, victims of ethnic uncertainty without knowing it, end up hurting and not helping their brethren. They negotiate situations in the name of Hispanos and they expect, if not demand, to be recognized as their benefactors. They actually portray themselves as the true and foremost Hispanos, especially before the mainstream culture. This is why there are Hispano teachers who belittle other Hispano teachers, individuals who have a job with a bilingual program but who "would not put their own child in it", persons who want a job, the one held at present by other Hispano!

There is nothing inherently wrong with power, authority, status. All human beings throughout history have aspired to achieve power, authority and status. Some cultures have honored, not abused these traits; similarly some individuals have been prominent by upholding the rights and opportunities of all people to achieve these attributes. There have been also those who have sought power, authority and status by dubious means. This has happened in all cultures and nations. The problem with Hispanos is that it should not suffice to try to achieve a personal goal by securing some measure of power, authority and status. There is a moral obligation to help others do the same. A good human being helps others as he/she helps him/herself. Every Hispano has the moral obligation to help his/her brethren instead of abandoning and/or otherwise hurting them.

When people from other ethnic groups hurt Hispanos, they may be called rascists, bigots, insensitive. But, what to call them when Hispanos themselves assume the role of the oppressor and/or exploiter? These are central problems which must be understood and solved among Hispanos. There is another aspect concerning ethnic uncertainty and it has to do with sentimentality. It is not that Hispanos should

"feel sorry for other Hispanos." To feel sorry for another person is to keep at a distance from someone assumed to be worse off. Instead of feeling sorry, Hispanos should feel compassionate for their brethren, realizing that there is a measure of circumstantial unfairness to the victimized person; but that in some ways, he/she too symbolizes the struggle of Hispanos as a group before the land of selective opportunities. It is an attitude that the suffering Hispano should also get a break.

The truly healthy view of ethnic uncertainty is that every Hispano should examine the quality of his/her existence and that of the Hispanos as a group. This must be done with honesty. If a potentially productive student is goofing off, hurting himself and others, he/she should be confronted accordingly. If a bilingual program is in shambles and in need of revamping, it would be dishonest to keep it just because it is called bilingual; if a person in charge is incompetent in the eyes of an honest analysis, it would be a dishonor to look the other way just because he/she is an Hispano. But it is the moral responsibility of any and every healthy Hispano to help, to build and offer constructive criticism in situations which call for his/her participation for the good of the group. The divisiness, the lurking mistrust which overcomes Hispanos who become trapped in the competitive American Society can only hurt the individual and the Hispano group. This means that an Hispano should not feel obligated to be incestuous by remaining and upholding Hispanidad regardless of the realities; far from it, every Hispano should open transactions, give and take situations which improve not only his/her individual condition but that of his/her group.

3. ETHNIC UNCERTAINTY AS A HEALTY SEARCH

Does ethnic uncertainty concern teachers? Of course, it concerns all adults who work with Hispano people, young and old. A professional must examine his/her

motivations and the results that those actions have on other Hispanos. He/she must be able to see beyond the daily masks, his/hers and those of others. A healthy person is relatively satisfied with him/herself. He/she learns to live with respect for what he/she has been and for what he/she represents to other Hispanos, particularly those children and parents who have some expectations of him/her. A healthy Hispano does not need to try to be anybody else but himself/herself. There is still another reason for Hispanos to overcome ethnic uncertainty and to achieve some measure of socioeconomic and political leverage in the aggressive and competitive American culture. This reason is sociohistoric. In spite of the fact that Hispanos have resided, worked, produced and died in continental U. S., even before it became a nation, Hispanos are but the latest ethnic minority to earn recognition; and it is far from achieving political respect and representation.

Thus, Hispanos are pressured in every way to prove their worth, especially under difficult if not unfair social circumstances which have been the grinding board of aspiring, hard-working poor minorities in this nation. But true equality will be earned through the realization that Hispanos- as a group- are important and worthy contributors to a better society. Hispanos will achieve significance in their Hispanidad. This means that a re-education of the Hispanos must start first at home, as parents convey a healthy acceptance of self to the children, in schools, where the Hispano children should be inspired and challenged to learn and teach, in society at large where Hispanos must re-examine their roles and functions as symbolic of what this new minority-which has cultural roots of wisdom and governance which date over 20,000 years-must do.

Incertidumbre étnica is, in its constructive form, a call for all Hispanos

to unearth and rediscover their forgotten knowledge, the cultural link, the language which unite the psyche of all Latins who are physically, educationally, socioeconomically and spiritually struggling to earn and achieve a respectable place in the American society. The present divisiveness of brother versus brother has to be transcended beyond the myopic vision of little cliques, partisanism and improvised politicking. There are millions- over 15 millions- of Hispanos in the continental U. S.! A master plan for re-discovery, renovation and progress is a must.

Trancending ethnic uncertainty will mark the beginning of true education and re-education. This is why Hispanos must start within themselves and their Hispanidad by telling and demonstrating to their offspring and to each other that it is good, respectable, important and desirable to be Hispanos; that it is crucial to search and know one's historical, cultural and ethnic development. A healthy examination of the shaking present and a mindful re-discovery will be the basis for a better future; and as the Hispano transmute and trascend the present stage of pain, separation and coarse tribalism which is dramatized by cliques versus cliques, by association versus association by self-styled representatives who step on each other toes....as the Hispanos come to realize and strengthen their past and present commonalities in order to polish out their differences, a new era will materialize. Fifteen million people ought to make a difference in the continental U. S.

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